

Information as a key tool for rural development. 25 years of experience in Spain

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Abstract

The lack of useful information has become a major obstacle that hinders the participation of the members of the community in the development process because they can not accurately perceive how their individual and/or collective action can influence their environment, and because of the lack of elements that support the decision-making processes. This article addresses these issues from the work carried out by the Association *Instituto de Desarrollo Comunitario de Cuenca* (IDC Cuenca) in the rural areas of this province of Spain for 25 years. The results show how the application of methodologies for the transmission of information tailored to each group of recipients in some aspects, enhances the participation of individuals.

Keywords: Rural development, information, participation, transmission, adaptation, utility

1. Introduction

The lack of substantial information and clear development proposals is a fundamental obstacle for decision-making, which makes it difficult to raise awareness and mobilize the population in order for them to participate in the development of their community (Vachón, 2001). However, the lack of information also leads to a lack of awareness regarding employment opportunities (Cuadrado, 1992) and the alienation of urban centers (Smailes et al., 2002). This has encouraged depopulation in rural areas. As a result, transmission of information is more complex – because of the depopulation –, and problems derived from the lack of information become worse (Sancho Comíns et al., 2002).

Providing information is fundamental for the creation and implementation of social processes (Quintana, 1984) – as is the case in any development project – and should be carried out in a strategic and integrated manner. Raising awareness forms part of the information process, with the idea that recognizing the realities motivates and drives people to transform them (Riva, 1993). During the process of informing, the objective is to raise awareness, whilst emphasizing the transmission of facts or trying to drive interest and awareness regarding a topic or problem (UNICEF, 2006). In every information strategy for community development, it is important to compromise and motivate individuals to change behaviors and support these changes (UNICEF, 2006).

Using this perspective, an information channel isn't measured by the quantity of information it transmits or for its aesthetic professionalism, rather by how it incorporates the recipients' involvement in the production process and how it links to the social processes that people have had to live through (UNICEF, 2006).

This article will summarize the experiences gained by the Institute for Community Development in Cuenca (IDC Cuenca) over 25 years, with regards to information in rural areas with low population density. The article discusses a process based on the promotion of participation of all sectors of the population, by means of improving information opportunities. In order to do this, the IDC Cuenca designed and applied a methodology characterized by: (1) the establishment of information as a process; (2) the capacity to adapt to the information needs required by the population; (3) the use of new information and communication technologies in the designed services; (4) complementarities and creation of synergies with training and social inclusion processes that are present in the rural areas. In order to carry out this investigation, during 2009 and 2010, a research team from Technical University of Madrid (UPM) carried out a documentary analysis of the information activities carried out by the IDC Cuenca, their results and their corresponding previous studies. Over 30 interviews took place with staff and executives from the IDC, rural development agents and participants in the information activities.

2. Intervention context

2.1. Institutional Context: The IDC Cuenca

The IDC Cuenca is a non-profit organization formed in 1985, with the objective of promoting community development in rural areas of Cuenca, Spain. The work carried out by the IDC Cuenca during these 25 years is aligned with the achievement of three main objectives. Firstly, the revaluation of human resources and restructuring of society in order to facilitate a development process led by the population under an equality framework, which improves their standard of living and avoids the gradual depopulation of rural centers. Secondly, the preservation and promotion of identity symbols, rural culture and natural resources. And finally, new techniques and technologies are implemented to improve the quality in the agricultural sector.

These objectives are carried out by means of a methodology based on guaranteeing access to information, improving training and facilitating the creation of a dynamic network of associates. The IDC drives these processes through animation strategies, a thorough understanding of the realities facing the area and by establishing relations with the population. After 25 years, this methodology has been shown to be capable of meeting the perceived needs of the population as well as those development needs which are more specific and urgent, and reconciling both with **each community's starting point. As a result, the IDC has strengthened itself as a key organization in the area, facilitating a number of development processes in the province of Cuenca.**

2.1.1. Territorial Context: The Province of Cuenca

The province of Cuenca is located to the east of the Iberian Peninsula, in the autonomous community of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain. The province covers 17,141 km² (**Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2008a**) with a population of 217,363 (INE, 2009). The population density is 12.68 people per km² (INE, 2009), well under the national average, which is 90.6 people per km² (INE, 2010) and the European Union, which has 113.5 people per km² (INE, 2010). Of the 238 municipalities that form the province, nearly 80% (186 municipalities) have a population density lower than 10 people per km², and 111 municipalities have less than 4 people per km² (INE, 2008b). Currently, the majority of the province suffers from a phenomenon of depopulation, which involves a loss of 34,208 people (13%) since 1970 (INE, 1970) and its classification as a disadvantaged area at risk of depopulation, according to the White Paper on Agriculture in Spain (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food [MAPA], 2003).

The territory presents a marked tendency towards predominance in agricultural activity, the absence of training and service offerings, deficiencies in communications – initially regarding the road infrastructure and currently linked to information and communication technology –, and social networks disintegration. IDC Cuenca aims to stop this tendencies through its work, but in some cases, this tendencies still encourage people to leave the area. These tendencies are **reflected in Spain's sustainable rural development programme during 2010-2014** (regulated by

Law 45/2007), in which three of Cuenca's five regions are within the rural zones to be revitalized due to their low population density, the predominance of agricultural activity, low-income rates, their geographic isolation, and the territorial structure. The two remaining regions are classified as intermediate rural areas; which are those with low or medium population density, diverse employment, low or medium income rates and located far from large urban centers (Ministry of Rural and Coastal Environment [MARM], 2010).

3. Information methodology

During the last 25 years, the IDC Cuenca has driven a community development process in Cuenca's most depopulated rural areas, considering information as an essential tool for creating and maintaining the high levels of participation. In order to do this, it has constantly maintained the objective of improving access to, as well as the **quality and efficiency of the population's information**. It considers that in rural areas information is not received in a fluid manner, or when it does arrive, it is not sufficiently adapted to the interests of the population. As a result, **information has become a necessity within the IDC Cuenca's work, both for being able to achieve the inherent objective of informing, as well as implementing its work proposals under the principles of community development.**

The information process that the IDC has driven, presents a series of methodological characteristics and distinctive tools, which have ensured that this process continues today after 25 years. (1) The first of these characteristics is the establishment of information as a process (UNICEF, 2006) that starts and consists of a group of consecutive and consistent phases. (2) Another important characteristic is the ability to adapt, both to the information needs of the population (Robirosa et al., 1990), as well as the different streams of information used and to developed communication mechanisms. (3) The third characteristic highlights the use and adaptation of new communication and information technologies in the mechanisms designed for improving information opportunities in rural areas (Grimes, 2000). Lastly, it is need to exploit the complementarities and creation of new synergies with the training and social involvement processes in the rural territories.

The IDC brings the information process to life through a number of techniques. These methods are understood to be the necessary measures for carrying out a certain informative project, and they are based on three core paths of action: group meetings, personalized, or a la carte service, and the introduction of new communication and information technology. At the same time, the methods are the result of three fundamental factors: the proposed **community developments that govern the IDC's actions, the experience gained, and the technical, administrative and economic requirements for assistance grants, established by the civil service.**

The information transmitted by these methods should comply with three basic conditions: (1) it should be specific, i.e. it must respond to the needs of the people at which it is directed, (2) the way in which it is delivered should be adapted to the individual conditions and characteristics of the audience, and (3) it should be final, i.e. useful and used effectively by whoever receives it. The usage principles are two-fold, given that on one hand it aims **to satisfy people's needs, yet on the other hand it aims to stimulate demand for further complementary information**, which can widen the horizons of those who access useful information. As a result, useful information is compared with more conventional and neutral information transmission methodologies or those without recorded results or effects (UNICEF, 2006). Meeting these three basic conditions would not be possible if the IDC Cuenca were not in touch with the territory, with a thorough understanding of the population and that aims to strengthen the potential of local human resources, as the main protagonists of their development processes.

During the information process three main phases are identified, according to the type of information required by **the population. These phases do not necessarily have to occur in time order; rather they can alternate in each group's journey**, in line with their needs. The first of these is characterized by the transmission of punctual information in an informal manner, information that tends to motivate people, to transmit certain information elements that are capable of mobilizing them and driving actions. A second phase where the structuring of information in specific areas of interest demanded by the population not only encourages an increase in local information opportunities, but also an improvement in self-esteem amongst the local population. This provides added value because the population can feel valued by seeing how an organization tailors information content to their needs, interests and expectations.

A third phase that can be specialized, where the information transmitted is more specific and aims to satisfy the needs of certain groups within the population.

4. Results and conclusions

Information represents one of the essential elements for achieving successful advancements in any development programme, especially in areas with low population density. Through its work, the IDC has contributed to the information field in the province of Cuenca, which collectively represents an important achievement. This is substantiated by the experiences that have been analyzed during these 25 years.

The process began in 1984, by incentivizing the population by means of an endogenous culture in a cultural activity framework, which promotes unity through the appreciation of people's territory and aims to encourage their involvement in the improvement of their standard of living. This way of working developed by the IDC enabled it to enter the territory by being close to the population and led to the IDC being regarded in a positive way by the community as a partner in the process of community development.

The sense of belonging is inherent to human beings (Stuart, 1997; Shortall, 2008). This is how the IDC has generated a territorial identity which is understood as the identification of all the parties in the local community with their territory, its organizations, its environment, its products and services (Cotorruelo, 2001). As a result, it is necessary for the population to be involved in tackling the requirements which it deems most important. In order for the informative experiences to be adapted to the prioritized needs of the population, they should be based on flexible models that can provide innovative answers to these requirements within the context in which they are exposed to. Furthermore, in the IDC Cuenca's experience, it is proven how the solution to these requirements reveals other new solutions that encourage the continuation of the community development process (Rezsohazy, 1988).

As a result, the IDC, through the technical support of its professionals, has focused on social concerns and requirements (FAO, 2007). The work plan, along with the professionals, ensures that its informative content is specific, adapted and final, and acts as a unifying element amongst its members. Permanent education aimed at raising awareness of the local situation, the acquisition of new skills that encourage social participation, and the leadership of new development processes are also all of great importance. The information provided and the requirements of the population have increased jointly, defining an evolution that is in line with the development of communities and their human resources.

The information process promoted by the IDC Cuenca has followed a strategic path: the population's demand for specific information that allows the suitable content to be selected, as well as other related content, capable of widening its recipients' horizons. The IDC meets the specific needs of the population, which, in addition to accessing the available information, requires other informative elements of interest. In this context, the role of the IDC is to encourage and facilitate this process through the use of its tools and methodological characteristics. In the long-term, the strength of this information process as a development factor lies in the fact that it allows the population to tackle the different aspects of its development, in line with its needs. The process becomes sustainable when the population continues to dive deeper into information of interest, and it becomes a vehicle for training and the desire to improve the quality of life.

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